

BALTIMORE SUN
21 December 1986

North reportedly aided news leaks favoring contras

Knight-Ridder News Service

WASHINGTON — Lt. Col. Oliver North, the National Security Council aide dismissed amid the Iran arms scandal, routinely passed classified information on Central America to a State Department office that then leaked the data to television networks, according to officials familiar with the now-defunct program.

The leaks were designed primarily to produce news coverage favorable to the administration's policies and marshal support for aid to Nicaragua's contras, according to administration officials involved in the effort.

The sources, who agreed to speak on condition they not be identified by name or position, said Colonel North easily bypassed the thicket of regulations governing the declassification of the secrets, most of which he procured from the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency. Colonel North passed the information to officials in the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy for release to the press, the sources said.

U.S. officials disagreed last week about the legality of Colonel North's activities over the past three years, and whether they had been authorized. The former director of the Office of Public Diplomacy, Otto Reich, said he had been unaware of the leaks or of Colonel North's close involvement with his staff.

Sources who worked with Colonel North said there was a widespread perception among government officials that he acted on the authority of President Reagan, which helped him to command secret information and make it available for public release.

"Everyone in our office knew Ollie was acting with the president's authorization on Central America," said a former employee of the public diplomacy office.

Consulted about Colonel North's activities Friday, a White House official confirmed that "North played a role in the declassification of information about Nicaragua and the reality of Central America so that it could be released."

The official, who said he had known of Colonel North's relationship with the public diplomacy office, added: "We assume that he acted with the approval of his immediate superiors." The official said Col-

nel North had not arranged for dissemination of classified information — a serious crime — but had only passed along information that had been submitted to a "greatly accelerated declassification process."

Officials who participated in the project insisted that in many instances Colonel North had passed along classified intelligence materials.

"I hope that didn't take place, because leaking classified information is breaking the law," said Mr. Reich, the former special coordinator of the public diplomacy office, in a telephone interview from Caracas, Venezuela. Mr. Reich said his office staff always followed orthodox declassification procedures, which he said "took hours, sometimes months."

At first, Mr. Reich said he was sure "Ollie North was not involved" in the work of his office. After reflection, his certainty softened.

"Anything is possible because it's clear North was doing a lot of things no one knew he was doing," Mr. Reich said.

The data Colonel North provided for release almost always appeared to be accurate to the reporters who received it, and it generally was believed to be useful in correcting misleading and self-serving propaganda emanating from Managua.

Dramatic television and, occasionally, newspaper coverage based on intelligence data Colonel North procured included stories about the clandestine arrival in Nicaragua of 100 Cuban military advisers in May 1985; participation in combat against the contras by Cuban helicopter pilots; and the development of closer ties between Iran and Nicaragua, according to officials who worked in the program and other sources.

Colonel North's involvement in the Office of Public Diplomacy began as a natural extension of his White House duties as deputy director of policy development and political-military affairs.

His activities appeared to be similar to the role he played this year in a privately sponsored nationwide television campaign to pressure congressional opponents of aid to the contras. Colonel North procured film for the ads from the Defense Department, according to Pentagon spokesmen, and participated in fund-raising efforts to finance the campaign.

Colonel North's contra-support activities led him to keep a grueling 20-hour-a-day schedule, underlining his singular understanding that the survival of the contras depended on influencing American public opinion to support the president's policies.

The public diplomacy office, in fact, was created at the suggestion of a special National Security Council planning group in 1983 in the belief that the State Department's press office was not equipped to provide enough information on Nicaragua to promote the president's policies, according to administration officials.

From the beginning, the office had an ambiguous chain of command. It was housed in the State Department and answerable, on paper, to Secretary of State George P. Shultz, but several staff members in the diplomacy office said they knew they were, in fact, working for the NSC.

These sources also said they believed that Mr. Shultz was unaware of the office's role as an officially sanctioned leaks bureau. A State Department spokesman declined comment.

Colonel North joined the NSC staff in 1981, but the first known instance in which he collaborated in a significant leak came in 1983, according to a knowledgeable source.

Colonel North learned during an April 1983 interagency meeting that Brazilian authorities had discovered Soviet arms destined for Nicaragua aboard four Libyan cargo planes refueling at an Amazonian airport. Colonel North approved a military intelligence officer's recommendation that the information be shared with a television network, a source said.

The subsequent television coverage created a furor in Brazil, forcing authorities to turn the planes back to Libya and handing the Reagan administration a propaganda coup. That episode was the beginning of Colonel North's arrangement with the public diplomacy staff to pass along useful intelligence data quickly enough to find its way onto the evening news, according to a source who worked with him.

During the 1983 Grenada invasion, Colonel North's round-the-clock White House work gave him intimate familiarity with the flow of intelligence data from the island. Colonel North, through the diplomacy office, directed the television networks to the caches of Soviet-made weapons found on the island, said a source familiar with the disclosure.

In 1984, Colonel North declassified intelligence data that described acquisition by the Sandinistas of chemical weaponry, according to a source who worked with him, and the information produced stories in several newspapers.

STAT

2

In May 1985, as Congress debated whether to approve \$27 million in non-lethal aid for the contras, Sandinista propagandists announced the departure of 100 Cuban military advisers, characterizing the development as a concession. Two days later, Colonel North responded by arranging the declassification of U.S. intelligence indicating that although one Cuban contingent had left Nicaragua, scores of new soldiers had arrived from Havana to take their place, informed sources said.

That summer, according to these sources, Colonel North also arranged the publication of U.S. reports that Cuban airmen were piloting Soviet-made Mi-24 helicopters in combat against the contra rebels.

As Colonel North's influence grew, he succeeded in persuading the CIA and the DIA to release top-secret aerial photos of Nicaraguan military installations for publication in reports of the diplomacy office, the sources said.

Among the most important revelations Colonel North facilitated exposed the Sandinista construction of a two-mile concrete airstrip north of Managua at Punta Huete capable of handling sophisticated Soviet aircraft, according to a source involved in the disclosure.

At the same time, Colonel North moved to influence the process by which U.S. journalists were given access to the contras' border camps in Honduras. When Honduran authorities temporarily blocked journalists from the camps in early 1985, Colonel North dispatched a U.S. official to the border to assess the likely impact of giving reporters greater access, according to a source who was present in the camps at the time.

The conclusion: Open the camps to the press so reporters could see the contras' urgent needs.

For reasons that remain unclear, the Office of Public Diplomacy quietly ended its program of media leaks and reorganized its staff last summer.